



Map 2

dominated economy. Recalling the trauma of the 1930s, land was nationalised in 1953, and private lending to farmers banned (a situation that largely persists today), eviscerating the remaining Indian landlord class. Burmanisation culminated in the nationalisation of 15,000 businesses after the 1962 military coup, prompting 125,000 to 300,000 ethnic Indians to flee the country. They followed the more than 400,000 Indians, British and Anglo-Burmese who had already left following decolonization. The post-2011 “969” movement, which encouraged Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses, is arguably just the latest instantiation of this form of xenophobic economic nationalism.

Colonisation also left a legacy of deep religious trauma. On top of the loss of indigenous sovereignty and the influx of Muslims, the British refused to perform the usual duties of Buddhist kingship, such as appointing abbots, and permitted growing Christian missionary activity, provoking a deep sense of cultural crisis among Buddhists. The restoration of Buddhism became central to Bamar nationalism, and steadily this religion, and Bamar culture, became hegemonic elements of postcolonial nation building efforts, with ethnic and religious minorities being increasingly “othered”.

Today, many ordinary Myanmar Buddhists genuinely believe that—like in colonial times—their religion and culture is under threat from a Muslim demographic “tidal wave”. They often point to countries like Indonesia, formerly home to Buddhist and Hindu empires, as examples of what Myanmar will become without vigorous countermeasures. This has virtually no objective basis: only about 3 percent of Myanmar’s

population is Muslim, while around 89 percent are Buddhist.

But this fact is irrelevant, since most people nevertheless believe it, following decades of government propaganda, atrocious educational provision, and widespread deference to Buddhist monks, some—though far from all—of whom have promoted virulent Islamophobia. Nor is this fear of being culturally overwhelmed new, or somehow a product of the post-2010 “democratic” transition. Anti-Muslim riots occurred under the previous military regime, in 1997 and 2001, and the notorious Buddhist nationalist monk, Ashin Wirathu, the figurehead of Ma Ba Tha, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, was jailed for incitement in 2003.

This history explains why there is widespread support today for Ma Ba Tha, for the Protection of Race and Religion Laws (which discriminate against Muslims) and for the ethnic cleansing currently being perpetrated by the Myanmar military. It also explains why, politically, Aung San Suu Kyi has such limited room for manoeuvre—though it must be stressed that she has done virtually nothing to challenge these dangerous myths or to foster intercommunal harmony. Indeed, her own offices use of the term “Bengali”, her past remarks about “global Muslim power”, and her purging of Muslims from the ranks of NLD parliamentary candidates in 2015, all suggest that she may even personally share anti-Muslim prejudices.

It is the intersection of these material and ideological dynamics that explain the recurrent persecution of the Rohingya and anti-Muslim attacks more generally, rather than a simplistic,

short term land-grabbing agenda. Many Muslims were viewed with inherent suspicion due to their association with colonialism and the Mujahit rebellion. After decolonisation, although the term “Rohingya” was used in official circles, they were never formally accepted as one of Burma’s official ethnic groups. Initially, they were allowed to vote, and several were elected to parliament, with one even serving as a junior minister. However, as Bamar Buddhist nationalism intensified, and struggles by ethnic minorities resisting forced homogenisation mounted—prompting the onset of the world’s longest running civil wars—the state became increasingly hostile towards its Muslim population.

In 1962, the army expelled Muslims from its ranks. In 1977, the belief that many “Bengalis” had exploited the state’s weak border controls to cross from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh into Rakhine led the military-backed regime to launch clearance operations ahead of a national census, displacing 200,000 Muslims into Bangladesh. Thereafter, under the new 1982 Citizenship Act, the Rohingyas were gradually stripped of their rights, often finding themselves unable to prove their families’ long-term residency in Burma—thanks in part to the destruction of records in previous rounds of conflict and forced displacement. When, after 1988, the Rohingyas participated prominently in the pro-democracy movement, hoping to recover their rights, they again faced violent suppression, prompting another exodus in 1992, with 250,000 fleeing to Bangladesh.

The position of the Buddhist Rakhine needs special mention here. From their perspective, they have been doubly “victimised”, by a growing “illegal Bengali immigrant” population (even if the Rakhine still outnumber them two to one), and by the Bamar-dominated central government. Rakhine state is Myanmar’s second poorest, and what little development has occurred there has involved either a tiny handful of megaprojects—which create virtually no local employment and whose benefits are monopolised by the regime and foreign investors—or the development of a highly exploitative fisheries industry, with Thai trawlers using quasi-slave labour.

Conditions in Rakhine villages are sometimes scarcely better than those in Rohingya internally-displaced person camps. In conditions of extreme scarcity and economic competition, they profoundly resent the Western focus on the Rohingya, seeing donors as deeply “biased”, which explains violent attacks on aid convoys and protests against donor offices perceived to have slighted Buddhism. The Rakhines have seized the opportunity offered by the post-2010 transition to organise politically, dominating the state assembly. Many have also supported heavy

handed military and police action as a long awaited form of redress against their local rivals, and have exploited periods of unrest to seize land used by Rohingyas. However, some have even joined the Rohingyas in exile, reflecting a shared sense of desperation and impoverishment.

It is hardly surprising that these extraordinarily grim conditions have spawned violence among both communities. Rakhine militias organised to attack Muslims during the 1940s, and today three are active, all of which promote “self-determination” in Rakhine but reject the Rohingyas as “Bengalis”. The Rohingyas have also taken up arms periodically, and the only mystery is why the latest armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), has taken quite so long to form in the face of such harsh persecution and misery. ARSA’s attacks on police and army outposts—the most recent of which, in late August, triggered the army offensive behind the present refugee crisis—smack heavily of desperation, as men often armed only with catapults and wooden “guns” launch themselves at the security forces.

In short, while simple pecuniary motives can never be entirely discounted, particularly in Myanmar’s borderlands, the political economy underpinning the current Rohingya crisis is far more complicated than is suggested in articles making a few sloppy references to megaprojects and land grabs. Ultimately, like Myanmar’s other ethnic conflicts, it reflects the crisis-ridden nature of the Burmese state since its inception.

Burma was founded with no real meaningful consensus among its population groups over the nature of the state or nation, or the extent of power and resource sharing. Bamar-Buddhist chauvinists, unprepared to make the concessions needed to secure others’ consensual participation in nation-building, have instead sought to impose their vision by force, leading to brutality across the borderlands. However, the Rohingya have suffered particularly harshly because their claim to ethnic-minority status is not even recognised. While the Bamar state seeks to coercively incorporate recognised ethnic minority groups into the Union, it seeks to coercively exclude the unrecognised Rohingya. That is, ultimately, traceable to British colonialism and its legacy.



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